Virtually Real: Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* Trilogy

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The Hunger Games *trilogy by Suzanne Collins deals with a dystopian future society in which a punitive ruling elite provide 'entertainment' for the masses in the form of mediatised 'games' featuring young people who must fight to kill one another until there is only one winner. The purpose of these games is to remind the populace of the power of the government and its ability to dispose of any who dare to defy it. In acknowledging violent 'games' as virtual entertainments which can be used to political effect, Collins suggests that they possess a disturbing capacity to undermine ethical perspective on the human, the humane and the real. Drawing on Baudrillard's ideas about simulation and simulacra as well as Elaine Scarry's and Susan Sontag's concerns for media representations of the body in pain, this paper discusses the ways in which the texts highlight the dangers of virtual modes while also risking perpetuating their entertainment value.*

Key words: The Hunger Games, *virtual, video war games, simulacrum, the body in pain.*

Suzanne Collins's highly popular dystopian trilogy, *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, is set in place called Panem, a post-apocalyptic country, totalitarian in nature, in which the ruling regime under the malevolent dictatorship of President Snow flexes its power through mediatised games designed to placate, entertain and incite fear in the population. The games, in which children from this brave new world are forced to kill one another, function as miniaturised wars, held in times of peace, as a macabre and brutal sabre rattling reminder of the power of the government and the devastating outcome of past attempts to challenge it. The trilogy heavily references the disturbing entertainment of Roman gladiatorial games as well as the immersive nature of computer/video games, the seductive allure of reality television and the distancing effect of mediatised images of war and violence to warn of the sinister uses to which these can be harnessed. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's ideas about

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simulation and simulacra, Elaine Scarry's concerns for the reality of the body in pain in representations of wartime combat, and Susan Sontag's advocacy of the social and political importance of images of the brutality and horror of war, this paper will discuss the ways in which the texts seek to highlight the dangers of virtual entertainment mode and their capacity to mask 'real' suffering, torture, violence, and death. This reading of the series allows it to be a clever engagement with the idea that exposure to virtual entertainment media forms frustrates attempts at critical distance from them to the point where it is difficult to identify and engage productively with the actual to which they refer. In considering this, the paper will also question whether the trilogy's repetitive and elaborate use of the virtual entertainment modality risks compromising the ethical freight carried in the texts by young female protagonist, Katniss Everdeen.

Collins has commented that one of the motivations for writing *The Hunger Games* trilogy occurred when she was channel switching between reality television shows where young people were competing for money and footage of the Iraq war in which people were fighting for their lives (Collins [Blasingame] 726). This juxtaposition highlighted for her the seductive influence of reality television shows and video war games with their leverage of the virtual over the real, their power to not only mute the impact of media representations of adverse and horrifying experiences, but also to be established as equivalent 'entertainments'. The author's observations crucially identify the importance of the audience/player in co-participation in the uncanny space between the real and the virtual which complicates distinguishing one from the other in any clearly defined fashion. Baudrillard identifies this process as a 'crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth' (2) and he names this as defining our contemporary media driven age; it is, he argues, the 'era of simulation' which 'lends itself to all systems of equivalents'(2). The blurring between the real and the virtual presses towards the liquefaction of referents, so that there is an ultimate loss of signposts for determining the truth. Baudrillard describes this as the 'precession of simulacra', a 'question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes' (2). The 1997 film *Wag the Dog* drew heavily on this paradigm for its narrative about a counterfeit war invented to distract public attention from the scandals of a (fictional) American President. In Collins's trilogy, the mediatised games are used by President Snow in a similar fashion; they are a distraction from the real game of economic inequality, and their configurations offer a viewing audience 'all the signs of the real' while camouflaging 'all their vicissitudes'. That this kind of masking exists in most developed countries which have access to powerful technologies, is clearly a major point made by the trilogy.

The first book of the series, the titular *The Hunger Games*, establishes the context for the events that unfold over the three narratives. The first suggestion of the simulacra occurs in the vague references to the origins of Panem, the country in which the narratives are set. Through Katniss, the reader's only

'reliable' link to any information about this world, we are told that Panem 'rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America' (*The Hunger Games* 21) and this is the authorised story which cannot be either disputed or verified. The past history of the country is not known. This enables the recent history of Panem to also be a malleable construct, and in the hands of the villainous ruler, President Snow, the official line is that he has turned a once devastated country into a functioning and productive society, bringing peace and prosperity to its citizens. As the narrative unfurls from Katniss Everdeen's perspective, this particular account of the immediate past is revealed as a chimera for the majority of the population as it is only experienced in the shining Capitol where the President lives and where the privileged populace enjoys a cornucopia of unlimited delights – food, entertainment, pleasure, leisure. The Capitol's status as a pleasure dome is dependent on the hard work and suffering of the remainder of the population of Panem as we learn that the country is divided into twelve districts radiating out from the Capitol from the richest to the poorest with each district providing its best services and produce for the benefit of the Capitol's residents. Katniss Everdeen, along with her mother and younger sister Prim, lives in the poorest district, coal mining District 12, where survival is by no means guaranteed, and where mining accidents frequently occur. Indeed, Katniss's father was killed in one such accident, an event that has emotionally immobilised Katniss's mother and precipitated a somewhat resentful Katniss into the breadwinner role. President Snow's control of the districts and his shoring up of power and material wealth for the Capitol relies heavily on managing and manipulating the 'real'. To this end, the districts are heavily surveilled and audited by the ruling powers, and a mediatised, mediated event called the hunger games is held each year to entertain the masses and to act as a reminder to the populace of what might happen to them should they decide to rebel. Such a doomed insurgence we are informed, occurred in the past by the nuclear weapons producing District 13, which, according to official history, had been extirpated. In their virtual form, and kept archivally as the only record of the 'history' of Panem, the hunger games annually re-enact to the populace these processes of distortion and elimination of the past. Functioning as a miniature replica of a war that only the government can possibly win, the games also remind the populace about who is in power.

In their mediatised, ritualised entertainment form, the hunger games also act as masking agents at another level – the personal level of suffering, fear, violence, and killing. Representatives (a boy and a girl) from the twelve districts that make up Panem are forced by the authorities to participate in a battle to the death until only one of these 'tributes' is left. With the exception of the wealthier districts which produce Career tributes (tributes whose lives are dedicated to competing in the hunger games), the stakes are enviably high for the vast majority of the population who live in poverty and near starvation. The survivor wins food, a decent house, relative safety for his/her family, and the perennial honour of being the winner of the game. The hunger games in the first book and the Quarter Quell in the second book *Catching Fire* – a special anniversary hunger

games involving the surviving winners of past games – are stage-managed in a vast purpose-built arena in the Capitol and televised to the populace. In her narrative mapping of the games, Collins draws on a number of sources both ancient and modern including Roman gladiatorial games and other ancient entertainment-based practices designed to placate the masses; the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur and violent video/computer games. All of these share what Collins calls the gladiatorial paradigm which, she claims, consists of '(1) a ruthless government that (2) forces people to fight to the death and (3) uses these fights to the death as a form of popular entertainment'([Collins] Blasingame 726). Like their Roman counterparts, the hunger games are sites of festive spectacle, circuses of publicly witnessed and officially condoned bloodletting and violence as confided in Katniss's comment, 'To make it humiliating as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to treat the hunger games as a festivity, a sporting event pitting every district against the others' (*The Hunger Games* 22). The so-named tributes, the participants in the hunger games, recall the Roman practice of exacting payment (that is, tributes) from the populace for the purposes of waging war. The hunger games also reference the Roman system of rewards and entertainment that Juvenal was to call in Satire X *Panem et Circenses*, bread and circuses. In naming her futuristic dystopian world Panem, Collins critiques, as Juvenal did, the cheap but also sinister Roman political practice of providing food and entertainment to the populace to secure votes and to ensure their compliance. In Collins' trilogy, the reward for the winner of the hunger games is a year's supply of food for the district they represent – a considerable lure for a population kept in a perpetual state of starvation. In charting this course of governance, war and peace are sustained in an adjunctive and mutually dependent space eventually becoming almost indistinguishable from each other.

The Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, also alluded to in *The Hunger Games*, was a ruthless ritual by which powerful rulers asserted their monopoly over the adult populace through control of the lives of children. The story refers to Crete's 'peacetime' punishment of Athens following the war between these two cities. As a reminder of who was in power, the rulers of Crete forced those of Athens to send ritual sacrifices of seven girls and seven boys every nine years into an intricate labyrinth where the Minotaur lived. Until the Minotaur was finally slain by Greek hero Theseus, many helpless children died through this punitive political act. Collins commented that the message of the Minotaur story was 'we are going to do something far worse than kill you; we are going to kill your children' (Collins in Ketteler 55). The scenario of the hunger games involving young people who are effectively doomed if they do not win, models the same message. In referencing these precedents in her trilogy, Collins also highlights their longevity albeit in different guise. In our current times, violent video games and reality television shows serve much the same purpose; they are our modern bread and circuses and they are potentially dangerous detractors from what might really matter in terms of humanity's greater goals or the truths that their virtual mode so entertainingly conceals.

The 'gladiatorial paradigm' also emphasises the ways in which violent and oppressive acts structured in ritualised and mediatised forms can function metaphorically, muting the real through repeated use. In *The Hunger Games* texts, language and theatricality play a significant part in the process of eliding the real and of promoting the simulated. The nomenclature 'tributes', a term connoting sacrifice, support and honour for self and country, silences what they are – children and forced combatants in a dictator's political strategy of control. The supervisors of the hunger games who are known as the 'Gamemakers' are responsible for setting up and controlling the killing fields. The topography, the flora and fauna and the weather are artificially manipulated and dangerous and deadly obstacles are deliberately put in the way of the participants to direct the action. The performative nature of the event is foregrounded when Katniss, conscious of the omnipresent cameras, remarks, 'I'm probably on screen right now' (*The Hunger Games* 180). Moreover, the simulated mode, as her comments imply, encourages the tributes to function as avatars. They are representatives of District 2, or 3 or 12 rather than subjects with real names, histories, sentient bodies and agency. At the end of one day's carnage, Katniss comments, 'Eleven dead in all. Thirteen left to play' (*The Hunger Games* 185). This description is suggestive of her induction into the lexicon of life and death as a game operating in virtual space and time. Her first killing is another player referred to simply as the boy from District 9 – his real name is not known to her. It is evident that the lives of the citizens of Panem are intimately tied to the hunger games; they are their central point of reference, but it is their aesthetic style rather than their horrifying content that is firmly sustained in the popular imaginary. Katniss for example clearly remembers most of the past games, recalling that the most unpopular with the viewing audience were those with limited entertainment value. She comments that 'one year they provided only horrible spiked maces' and on another occasion a 'landscape of nothing but boulders and sand and scruffy bushes where many contestants were bitten by venomous snakes or went insane from thirst' (*The Hunger Games* 47). This somewhat dispassionate reference to the hunger games is more like an allusion to a failed, poor quality television drama than to what they really are – a slaughter in which young people competitively kill each other for the amusement of the populace and reinforcement of the positions of the powerful in the Capitol.

The trilogy focuses in large part on the ease with which the real can be transformed into the virtual space through technical and aesthetic manipulation of viewers and participants. In his comments on simulation and simulacra, Baudrillard suggests that the constant process of transformation confounds the distinction between the real and the virtual so that is 'becomes impossible (for one) to locate' oneself in time and space, to work out if one is outside or inside the simulacrum (29). In the hunger games of the first book, the viewing audience is invited to actively participate in the drama of the games they are watching, thereby minimising the distance between audience and participant and blurring the boundaries of the simulated and the actual. The audience can become sponsors, providing food, medicine or weaponry to help their favourite tribute

win. In this they are recruited as associate directors of the simulation, players of and in the game, contributing to its theatricality and its sub-plots, aiding and abetting murder and violence. Katniss at one stage comments that, 'I'm glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I'm a good bet' (199). While this is a strategy Katniss uses for survival, it also indicates the game-playing entertainment mode in which she is forced to operate. Katniss's mentor, Haymitch, who helps broker the favours the viewers can bestow on their favourites, provides her with a healing balm after she is caught by a fireball which the Gamemakers have deliberately released to liven things up because the one thing the Games must not do is 'verge on dullness' (*The Hunger Games* 209). Later when Katniss rescues a near-death Peeta she gives him a kiss which earns them a 'pot of hot broth' (*The Hunger Games* 316) from Haymitch for playing up to the star-crossed lovers' role that has been constructed for them for the pleasure of the watching crowd. This leaves Katniss in a state of confusion about her 'real' feelings for Peeta, a feeling which lingers throughout the trilogy, until the very end. In *Catching Fire*, in preparation for their participation in the Quarter Quell games, Peeta and Katniss watch re-runs of Haymitch winning his hunger games event many years earlier. The scene provides graphic and disturbing detail of the deaths of the contestants, one of whom was a close friend of Katniss's mother. The shock of recognition is assuaged however by Peeta's greater interest in Haymitch's discovery of the force field at the bottom of a cliff in the arena which can be effectively harnessed as a weapon. This re-directs the discussion back to the gaming mode and arms Peeta and Katniss, as players of the game, with a way of surviving the Quarter Quell.

While Katniss is increasingly aware of the manner in which her life and that of others is being manipulated through the virtual modes, such understanding is repeatedly tested by the ways in which she is re-inserted into the medium either as a participant or a viewer. In the final book of the trilogy, *Mockingjay*, Katniss is recruited by the leaders of the rebels as the titular mockingjay, a symbolic figurehead of the rebels. In this role she is again manoeuvred into a virtual position despite the carnage she witnesses in the bombing of a makeshift hospital. Katniss is repulsed and nauseated by what she sees, and although her address to the cameras in relation to this incident – 'President Snow says he's sending us a message? Well I have one for him. . . .If we burn you burn with us' – comes, according to her, from her 'own being', it is clear that the fine line between what she is and what she is made to represent is delicate and often blurred (*Mockingjay* 181). This is conveyed in a later scene as she watches the video promo of the hospital bombing incident as it has been engineered by the rebels into an aesthetic form in the post-editing phase. Katniss even applauds her own performance, in this gesture subconsciously acknowledging the transformation of the real (no matter how shocking) into a seductive form of entertainment.

The Hunger Games trilogy also conjures the spectre of the TV talent show which in high measure lays claim to the performative, the competitive and the entertaining. This is strongly enunciated in the hunger games in books one and two and it ghosts the action in book three, despite the latter's move into a more

sombre and reflective mode. Before the hunger games begin, each set of tributes undergoes training in specific weapons and appears before a judging panel to exhibit their skills and compete for important scores which might better their chances in the arena. An interview on a chat show with MC Caesar Flickerman and a make-over by their personal stylist offer the contestants opportunities to win the favours and sponsorships of the crowd. Katniss and her fellow tribute Peeta are transformed under their stylist Cinna's tastefully theatrical hand into costumed stand-outs, their outfits reflecting their coal mining district. Katniss describes her costume with great appreciation for its indexical elegance 'a simple black unitard, shiny leather boots, fluttering cape and headpiece of orange yellow and red' (*The Hunger Games* 81). Both she and Peeta triumphantly enter the city centre by chariot, their capes and headpieces ablaze with synthetic fire. This event is described by Katniss in ways that acknowledge her contestant status, her enjoyment of the occasion rather than what it is a prelude to – her possible/probable death. Katniss comments, 'As I gain confidence I actually blow kisses to the crowd. The people of the Capitol are going nuts, showering us with flowers, shouting our names. … The pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood, and I can't suppress my excitement' (*The Hunger Games* 85). She is equally impressed with the costumes Cinna designs for her for the Quarter Quell. His artistry transforms her into 'some unearthly being who looks like she might make her home in the volcano' (*Catching Fire* 248). In referring to herself in third person, she discloses that her identity is conferred by others. She is a manufactured thing, forced into performative mode, which in turn generates another performance of 'self': 'Katniss the girl on fire has left behind her flickering flames and bejewelled gowns and soft candelight frocks. She is as deadly as fire itself' (248). In *Mockingjay*, she is 'made over' as a rebel, and although she knows there is a closer alliance between the rebel image and what she feels inside, she observes, 'As a rebel, I thought I'd get to look more like myself. But it seems a televised rebel has her own standards to live up to' (*Mockingjay* 71). This telling comment suggests that the theatre of war has its own virtual structures that allow it to be a game played by those in power for their own ends, and the casualties, including the truth, are a necessary cost.

Baudrillard argues that war through its televised form is also a simulacrum, but that this does not necessarily mean that suffering and horror are not still there. He writes: 'The moralists of war, the holders of high wartime values should not be too discouraged: the war is no less atrocious for being only a simulacrum – the flesh suffers just the same, and the dead and former combatants are worth the same as in other wars' (37). Baudrillard's comment here is not to deny the reality of war, but rather to suggest that the way it is imaged and represented inevitably fails to fully capture it – we are at the mercy of the deferred signifier. Elaine Scarry engages with this idea, but also impugns official, mediatised representations of war as a deliberate construction of simulacra. She argues that there is intentional discursive concealment of the real suffering that occurs in the way war is managed, annotated and represented and that in the contexts of war and torture the reality of the body in pain is subsumed into

their rhetorical structures 'as if it were not there' (12). Thus official reportage often displaces the reality of individuals and their suffering by euphemistically transferring it to 'inanimate groups or large objects' so that one reads of 'weapons being disabled', or 'Division Six being wounded' (Moore, np). In Collins's trilogy the same kind of camouflaging effect occurs. The games of Books One and Two and the 'real' civil war in Book Three share a similar space of representation. They function as dramas, virtual enactments directed by the authorities, and in this manner they deny the reality of the body in pain and draw on the masking rhetorical structures to which Scarry alludes. In 'playing' her hunger game role, Katniss refers to her dead fellow tributes as 'casualties' and 'fatalities' while the anthemic ritual organised by the authorities for the dead tributes each night of the games recalls the official memorialisation of soldiers with its capacity for disembodiment and authorised appropriation.

Another simulacra referenced by Colllins' texts are video war games. According to Sue Scheibler, World War 2 themed video games are 'an ever growing and ever-expanding part of the multi-billion dollar video game industry' and the military aid the game industry in their manufacturing of war games offering an authentic 'experience' of war. A corollary to this participation is that the military use video war games for recruitment and training purposes (87). It is arguable that these war games heighten the 'reality' effect of war-time combat but also simultaneously reduce it because of their virtual formats. As Bayer notes, 'virtual wounds can be healed easily, and virtual death is followed by the opportunity to play again' (71), and in a Baudrillard-esque comment adds 'nevertheless, both movies and computer games will shape the future perception of historical and contemporary wars, especially as the distinction between reality and virtuality will become increasingly difficult' (71). Scheibler expresses concern about this blurring when she asks: 'what strategies are used to bring some awareness of the pain, suffering, loss, and cost of war?' (93). In Cory Doctorow's *Anda's Game*, the main female character Anda gains a powerful self-image by taking on an aggressive and ruthless female avatar whose main mission in the war-like game she plays is to kill as many of the enemy as possible. Equally however, her 'real' self gains ethical perspective through her experiences both outside and inside the game and a capacity to know the difference between the virtual and the real. Victoria Flanagan's analysis of the female body and subjectivity in this story notes the importance of this distinction when she writes, 'The text's construction of the digital world as a space in which young women can experience empowerment on both an individual and collective level is underpinned, however, by an acknowledgement that virtual reality is not a substitute for real life' (48). The same ethical concerns about the tensions between technologies of the self and care for others raised in *Anda's Game* are also central to Collins's trilogy and are particularly pertinent to the final book in the series. In *Mockingjay*, the hunger games have been replaced by outright war between the Capitol (led by President Snow) and the Districts (led by President Alma Coin of District 13). The way war is waged in mediated and mediatised format as were the hunger games in the first two books identifies their participation in the

same virtual space. Both sides in the war make extensive use of video footage for propaganda purposes – trying to stay ahead of the game to leverage psychological as well as material victories.

The constant morphing of the real into the virtual calls for some kind of perspective that distinguishes between them. Just as Anda's on and off line experiences provide this point of distinction in *Anda's Game*, in *The Hunger Games* the female focaliser, Katniss Everdeen, is used strategically to perform this task. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen is clearly intended as the reference point for the ethical dimension that countersigns the simulated effect and its disquieting uses. She opposes the regime in thought if not in deed from the beginning in her defiance of rules about hunting in the woods, in her trading of food and other material things on the black market, and in her private criticism, shared with her friend and hunting companion Gale and later with Peeta, of the regime's punitive power strategies – tesserae, reaping, the hunger games. She begins to more fully comprehend the government's power and cruelty when she is forced to participate in the hunger games, volunteering to replace her sister Prim, whose name is initially drawn in the lottery. Katniss often protests against the panoptic strategies of the powerful and insists that she is 'more than just a piece in their Games' (*The Hunger Games* 236). She protects Prim, her sister, by taking her place in the hunger games and she is defiant of authority in the small tactics of rebellion she performs despite recognising that she has no real power of her own. The tactics of those with little power are perforce opportunistic as Michel de Certeau argues, and must be taken 'on the wing' (xix) because they operate within the wider cultural and social environment which 'others' them. Within the games arenas Katniss manages transient victories by seizing such opportunities. She works skilfully within the oppressive environment to protect herself, but equally begins to establish connection and compassion for the other victims in the games. Susan Sontag claims that compassion is 'unstable' and 'needs to be translated into action, or it withers' (101). As Katniss witnesses and is forced to participate in increasingly shocking and inhumane acts, her compassion is indeed 'translated into action'. In the hunger games of the first book, she expresses some remorse in her killing of the Boy from District 1; she provides assistance to Rue from District 11, who reminds her of her sister Prim, and when Rue becomes another victim of the hunger games Katniss finds a brief moment to mourn her and to reflect that her 'death has forced me to confront my own fury against the cruelty, the injustice they inflict upon us' (*The Hunger Games* 286). The funeral rites she performs over Rue's body also provide an alternative image to the official emblazoning of the dead tributes, and her care for Rue precipitates other acts of kindness. Once he knows of Katniss's compassion for Rue, Thresh, Rue's co-tribute, does not kill Katniss when he has the opportunity (*The Hunger Games* 358). Later when Thresh is killed, Katniss finds she is able to name what the actual game is – an official sanctioning of 'murder' (*The Hunger Games* 375).

As Katniss begins to name the players in the hunger games, and to know the background and history of others in the Quarter Quell (*Girl on Fire*) so they become more embodied to her and therefore not as easy to kill without

conscience or remorse. In the hunger games in the first book, she eventually kills Cato, the most brutal of the tributes, out of pity not vengeance when he is physically atomised by cyborg wolf-hounds at the climax to the first novel, and she defies the rules of the game by helping and refusing to kill Peeta. Both she and Peeta play to the audience and outwit Snow by threatening to swallow poisoned berries. Katniss's memories of her family and her father punctuate her time in the arena and contribute to her growing sense of social and personal justice. She also strives to own a self that is not caught in the performative roles demanded by the game. Her father is the one who names her Katniss, and gives her the advice about remaining true to her 'self'. This advice sheets home towards the conclusion to the hunger games of the first book. At one stage Katniss questions who she really is given that her 'identity' has always been determined by others, but following the hunger games she reaches a point where she claims a 'self'; she literally washes off her avatar/gamer identity and in her words 'begins to transform back into myself' (*The Hunger Games* 450). Prior to the Quarter Quell games, Katniss claims, 'I am beginning to know who I am' (*Mockingjay* 244). Her experiences in her first hunger games later feed her more mature understanding of and compassion for her family and her immediate society. This provides an emotional bulwark against the retributive killings of Snow and is indexed in her changed relationship with her mother, with Prim's beloved cat, Buttercup, and finally in the resolution to her uncertain feelings about Peeta. The cat Buttercup is not unlike Katniss in that it is edgy and difficult and loyal only to Prim; Katniss's relationship with it signposts the development of a more empathetic and expansive self. At first she dislikes Buttercup but when, after the first games, she finds the cat has wandered back to her family's original home, Katniss takes it to the new one for Prim's sake, She also forges a strong affinity with Buttercup after Prim's death. Unlike the techno-robot animals in the arena which replicate the real, Buttercup is it 'self'. In the second and third books of the trilogy, Katniss's rising concern for the safety and survival of her loved ones motivates her to take a more active stance against her enemies, even though this stance involves making difficult choices about life and death. So while her involvement in the war situations heightens her ethical awareness, her compassion for others and her desire for freedom, it also complicates it. This is nowhere more disturbingly accented than in her insistence to be the one to kill Snow as a fair exchange for agreeing to become the mockingjay figurehead for the rebels. However, once she learns that Coin ordered the bombing that killed Prim, and that Coin wishes to reinstate the hunger games to punish the children of the Capitol, she kills Coin instead. The act is not unprecedented in wartime situations and this allows readers to engage more fully with the 'reality' of war and its confusing and troublesome claims on conscience and consciousness. Dauphinee argues that the best we can do under such circumstances is to '*imagine* the pain of others' but that this 'can only find an imperfect voice in rupturing moments' (146). If the 'imperfect voice' in the context of war and suffering is the only one that can be heard, Collins clearly wishes her readers to hear it. At various junctures throughout the trilogy there is a clear call to witness the recycling of war's

horrors and atrocities, expressed most potently in the cyborg monsters made from recycled parts of the bodies of the young dead tributes at the end of the first hunger games. Even after the war is over, the rebel victory assured, and the arenas and hunger games destroyed, that 'imperfect' voice reminds us of the *real* legacy of wars in the personal losses and post-traumatic stress suffered by Katniss and others, and in the manner in which young people like Gale embrace the warrior roles offered by war, finding in them an identity and a purpose that is acceptable rather than questionable.

While Katniss's experiences of suffering, killing and carnage through her forced participation in firstly the hunger games then later the civil war measure the ways in which readers are invited into the trilogy's expanding moral centre, there remains the question of the textual representation of these ideas. Does the repetitive and elaborate use of the virtual modality and its war games modes, unwittingly perpetuate the entertainment value rather than the ethical messages Collins is clearly wanting to claim for her trilogy? In an article on the release in the media of photographs and video footage of the torture and humiliation of prisoners by American soldiers in the Abu Ghraib prison, Dauphinee questions the use of aesthetic technologies that are used to articulate resistance to specific atrocities and acts of war which involve pain and suffering. In writing of the visual display of tortured and suffering bodies, Dauphinee observes that the 'body in pain is thus produced as an aesthetic visual image, a symbolic icon that stands in for itself as the referent object of political violence' (140). In other words, there is not enough evidence of a referent that might lie outside or even within the textual image to guide the viewer towards the 'correct' interpretation of it. Like Baudrillard's simulacra, it references only itself. Dauphinee concludes that there is no 'ethically pure way to circulate these images' by those who wish to use them to provide an oppositional politics to war, in that their circulation cannot guarantee the desired consequences. Dauphinee is particularly concerned about the ethical duty of both the producers who deliver these images with the best of intentions, and the consumers of the imagery of pain and suffering whose 'correct' responses are by no means assured. While acknowledging that there is no final solution to this dilemma, Dauphinee suggests that there should be more interrogation of how, why and with what effects writers, photographers and filmmakers employ aesthetic practices in resistance efforts, and what the 'answers might mean for others' (149).

I draw attention to Dauphinee's comments to identify what I perceive is a similar dilemma in Collins's repeated and extensive use of the games trope and the focus on the virtual mode that these substantiate. Her intention in pointing out the dominance of the virtual (especially its violent and inhumane forms) and its propensity to keep us from the real it simultaneously reveals and conceals is an important one for our time especially in this age of simulation. One reading of Collins's texts is to see them as re-affirming her concern about the ways in which our lives are dominated by the virtual to the point where we are invited to treat the virtual and the real as equivalents and to forgo our capacity to make moral distinctions about the truth or significance of what we see. This returns

us to Baudrillard's comments about the media imaging of wars which turns them into a simulacra unmoored to any referents and to Scarry's contention that such mediatisation diminishes our capacity to feel the pain of others, a condition that official representations of war foster and indeed rely on. For Schiebler and Bayer, initiation into the virtual space of video war games, no matter how 'real', cannot assure it will animate more moral or ethical concerns around the reality of suffering and violence to self and others. The televising of real wars poses a similar problem in that the mediatised format threatens to undermine their veracity. Sontag notes that 'real battles and massacres filmed as they unfold have been a routine ingredient of the ceaseless flow of domestic, small-screen *entertainment* (my italics)' (21). In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the entertainment value of the narrative is sustained through the repeated use of the war games trope as an aesthetic form. The video war game effect is also heightened in the final book by the increasing focus on the battle between good and evil, reduced for the most part to the tension generated in the confrontation between Snow and Katniss. So the question arises – is there a danger that the texts become what they condemn, a simulacrum that eventually fails to move beyond its own terms of reference? Already there are video games based on the hunger games format that invite potential Katniss avatars to trial their skills against other Snow-like adversaries. As I write, the film version of *The Hunger Games* has just been released and is garnering passionate interest from the fans of the trilogy, and there is evidence in this that the trilogy and the films may be the next big franchise after the Potter and Twilight juggernauts. The entertainment value of the virtual modes in and of the text, with their capacity to diminish moral perspective, has clearly appealed to young readers who, like the Roman crowds that roared for blood and the Emperors who urged them on, can monitor what happens in the narrative from the safe place that it sets up for them as players and spectators of the game.

But perhaps this way of looking at the texts is to underestimate readers, to take for granted that young players of violent video games and readers of texts dealing with violence are necessarily 'passive and uncritical consumers who are easily led' (Beavis np). Walkerdine, Beavis and others call for a more specific analysis of the ways in which the range of young viewers and readers engage with texts (computer games, books, films), of the subject positions created for them through these youth culture discourses and of the connections between readers' participatory habits and the real world. Sontag also eschews the suggestion that exposure to violent and horrific images, particularly in war-time situations, necessarily leads to passive responses which contribute to the elision of the real. She contends that those images 'showing something at its worst', can be productively 'didactic' and invite an 'active response' (81). Indeed Sontag implies that to shock, thereby accuse and possibly alter conduct, is the ethical as well as artistic duty of the photograph/artist who deals with the difficult and ugly aspects of people in conflict and crisis (81). One can argue then that Collins has not shirked from this approach despite the unpredictable responses it might engender. At the end of the trilogy, heavily traumatised by her 'active response' to the ugliness of war and oppression, Katniss makes the decision to embrace

'rebirth instead of destruction' (*Mockingjay* 453), Peeta's peaceful path not Gale's destructive one. She knows too that someday she will tell her children about her involvement in murder and war, including her own decision to kill Coin. Like Sontag who calls for the importance of exposing the horror of human conduct no matter how inured the audience might be to it, Katniss decides that it is her duty to tell her tale even if it means implicating oneself or running the risk of perpetuating the 'virtually real' in its telling.

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